



## Marketing Sustainability : What next?

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# Marketing Sustainability: What next?

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Sustainability is a term we are all familiar with, yet achieving balance across each element of ecology, economy and society remains elusive, regardless of how many warnings come from scientific bodies about the state of the climate or biodiversity. The United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, which declared that human activity since the industrialisation period has directly contributed to climate change affecting the ecology on the Earth (IPCC, 2018) acts as an urgent call to action for all disciplines. Dealing with the questions asked by this journal - i.e. what should be taken forward, and what should we reform or transform? - this article discusses sustainability marketing from a historical perspective and argues that greater empirical research is required, specifically addressing how sustainability is achieved. The article acknowledges calls to action for greater marketing research addressing sustainability from a macro-level (Gordon, Carrigan and Hastings, 2011; McDonagh and Prothero, 2014), but also recognises that these debates are challenging, given the hegemony of neoliberal economics. Despite this challenge, given the climate emergency, marketing must widen its horizons to the possibilities that macro-level research may offer to society and the discipline, both in theory and in practice. However, meaningful micro approaches that go beyond mere greening of products, to work with stakeholders in increasing awareness and behavioural change regarding sustainability, can still prove valuable as a bridge to where we are now and a more sustainable world. Therefore, using these micro-level innovations to create macro-level change within organisations will be a key output of this current research.

Sustainability is not new in the realm of marketing (Peattie, 2001; Kumar, Rahman and Kazmi, 2013; Kemper and Ballantine, 2019). Within the academy, social, green and sustainable marketing have evolved over the past five decades and progress has been achieved incrementally in the form of greener or more efficient products. While, in the early days of the marketing discipline, theorists focused on myopic debates (Levitt, 1960), the debate on the boundaries of marketing arose in the form of *Broadening the Concept of Marketing* and *Marketing's Changing Role in Social Relationships* (Kotler and Levy, 1969; Lazer, 1969). Kotler and Levy's (1969) study proposed that marketing extended beyond products and services, but also included marketing organisations and 'causes'. Whilst not all of their contemporaries agreed that marketing should extend to non-business activities (Luck, 1969), this juncture in the literature could be attributed to later debates on social marketing and green marketing that have since unfolded.

Beginning with the earliest review of the literature on marketing and the environment from 1971 to 1997, Kilbourne and Beckmann (1998) recognised that whilst the natural environment has been the focus since the early days, towards the latter stages of that period, the wider focus on sustainable development shaped the debate, which also encompassed the social dimension. Peattie and Peattie (2009) also chronicle the evolution of marketing's relationship with the environment. The first iteration of marketing's relationship with the natural environment began with what they describe as 'Ecological Marketing'. It was

characterised by concerns about air pollution and oil spills, with a focus on the automotive and chemical industries in the 1970s. They believe that these issues regained momentum after the Brundtland report (1987), which underpins the present-day interpretation of sustainable development. They described research during this period as 'Green' or 'Environmental' Marketing. Following this period came the Sustainable Marketing era, which was interested in 'transforming and reducing consumption' (p.261). In a later interpretation, Lim (2016) expands on the traditional triple bottom line understanding of sustainability and argues that a holistic view of sustainability marketing is one that includes technology and ethics.

The complexity of sustainability's meaning has compounded marketing debates on what sustainability marketing is and is not. Sustainability carries various meanings depending on the lens through which it is interpreted, surrounding economic viability, institutional longevity and environmentalism. Indeed, Belz and Peattie (2009) choose to use 'sustainability' instead of sustainable marketing as it evokes sustainable development rather than long-lasting customer relationships (Belz and Peattie, 2009 in McDonagh and Prothero, 2014). A reoccurring critique of sustainability marketing is the 'product centric' approach adopted by researchers (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019). Some have argued that the reason for this focus - on making the marketing mix more sustainable and selling 'green' products, rather than overhauling marketing assumptions - has been due to it 'not sit[ting] comfortably with the accepted theory or practice' (Peattie and Peattie, 2009 p.262). It is possible that reduction in consumption could lead to limited economic growth and challenge established economic principles. This would then result in a cannibalisation of marketing practice, in that the very strategy that should improve sustainable marketing practice will have the potential to disrupt markets as we know them, and render current traditional marketing practice useless. Therefore, the application of sustainable micro innovations at the macro-level may yield some useful macro-level strategy to avoid this cannibalisation and reignite market practice into the future.

Gordon *et al.* (2011) argue that marketing must move beyond the managerialist approach in dealing with sustainability, stating that there must be 'a breakaway from the dominant positivist managerialist epistemology' (p.157). They offer a conceptual framework for sustainable marketing, which maintains that sustainability can be achieved by a concerted effort of green marketing (micro), social marketing (behavioural change) and critical marketing (critique of existing marketing paradigms). They argue that each component cannot overcome issues such as climate change individually, but all three must occur in tandem (Gordon, *et al.* 2011). McDonagh and Prothero (2014) extend this argument. They build upon Kilbourne and Beckmann's review of the literature by analysing the period 1998 to 2013, and they argue that the debate has remained largely managerialist. Their literature review further explored if sustainability marketing was a micro- or macro-issue and found that the literature tended to focus on sustainability as a micro-issue within a managerialist perspective (McDonagh and Prothero, 2014). Kilbourne and Beckmann (1998) argued that the focus on green issues was at a micro-level until the mid-1990s when macro-studies began to take place. However, McDonagh and Prothero's (2014) review suggests that micro-issues were still capturing much of the scholarly attention within mainstream journals by the mid-2010s.

Further evidence supporting the view that the micro perspective has dominated the literature comes from a more recent extensive review by Kemper and Ballantine (2019), who also found that the micro perspective embodies the mainstream thinking on the subject. In their discourse analysis, Kemper and

Ballantine (2019) categorise this perspective as 'Auxiliary Sustainable Marketing' (ASM), which is the integration of sustainability throughout the marketing mix. Meanwhile 'Reformative Sustainability Marketing', emphasising increased sustainability in consumer lifestyle offers a mid-way point between a micro and more macro 'Transformative Sustainability Marketing', which 'aims to change institutions that inhibit a transition to a sustainable society' (p.289). It is possible that the plethora of micro approaches currently developed in the literature may perform better if institutional conditions are altered to facilitate a truly sustainable future. However, the current managerialist approaches have been designed to operate in an economic culture predicated on infinite economic growth, which is inherently unsustainable. Thus, the current sustainable micro approaches cannot be fully sustainable, as they exist in a framework that is unsustainable. In the meantime, research that can work towards capturing public attention and changing behaviours regarding sustainability - through a mix of marketing strategy and social marketing, involving organisations and a wide range of stakeholders - should also be research priorities.

With this in mind, future research directions discussed in the literature include: addressing the sustainability attitude/ behaviour gap, the use of marketing tools for widespread change, sustainability within organisations and how it affects strategy, making sustainability valuable for customers and investigating the opportunities and threats for organisations who embrace sustainability (McDonagh and Prothero, 2014 pp.1196-1205). McDonagh and Prothero (2014) offer the most extensive list of future research directions for the discipline and some of these overlap with Kemper and Ballantine's (2019) more recent future directions. The fact that these issues remain is indicative that the pace of theoretical development in sustainability marketing is slow. Although this list is five years old, Kemper and Ballantine (2019) conclude that their literature review stating that research on the views of consumers on sustainable marketing and how sustainability is implemented by marketers would be valuable. These recent research recommendations offer a wide remit for current researchers in the field to investigate across the micro- and macro- perspectives.

Given the debates surrounding the meaning of sustainability marketing, and whether or not it ought to receive greater macro treatment, it is hardly surprising that sixty-two per cent of journal articles regarding sustainable marketing strategies during the period 1996 to 2011 were conceptual, rather than empirical (Kumar et al., 2013). Despite calls for greater macro-level research, many micro questions still require answering. Moreover, Kumar et al.'s (2013) study highlights that empirical issues within sustainability marketing strategy are beginning to receive greater treatment by scholars, thus indicating a gradual move towards empirical rather than conceptual studies. Further analysis of Kumar et al.'s (2013) study reveals that eighteen publications were identified as both environmentally focused and empirical, whilst only five studies from this sample were purely qualitative. These five studies occurred between 1997 and 2011 and are product - and organisation - oriented.

Kumar et al.'s (2013) article has shown that whilst sustainability has featured in marketing for some time and considerable contributions have been made in order to warrant several literature reviews to date, the pace of theory development - particularly within the strategy and implementation area - has been slow. The requirement for further studies on empirical issues such as sustainability marketing strategy and sustainability marketing implementation, suggests that there are opportunities for further qualitative studies that provide answers to 'how' questions, and which also offer richness of data in the context of 'where' and 'when' the phenomena occurs (Yin, 1981). With this in mind - in addition to

greater discussion regarding macro-level issues - there are some pressing micro questions that could assist with current sustainability efforts. Overall, analysing future research directions and methodological approaches in sustainability marketing, the literature would benefit from knowledge on the implementation of sustainability marketing in practice. Methods suited to answering 'how' based questions such as case studies could prove a useful mechanism to employ.

## Conclusion

In summary, as indicated in the literature, sustainability from the micro-level is well researched in marketing and there is a requirement for greater macro-level research to facilitate greater levels of sustainability in business and society. Having said that, traditional micro-marketing approaches may not be redundant, should they be innovated from the macro-level to inform macro-level strategy. When applied to the macro environment, micro strategy could inform changes to policy and redefine marketing practice as we know it. It is recognised that, given the neoliberal economic systems in which businesses currently operate, successful application of micro sustainable marketing in this setting is not without its challenges. However, if traditional marketing practices can be adapted to the macro-level, there is a possibility that marketing can be 'reset' to more sustainable practices. Having reviewed future research directions and methodological approaches within the literature, it is evident that there remain unanswered questions regarding the implementation of sustainability marketing. Moreover, there exists a significant slant towards conceptual studies. Empirical research is well placed to test sustainable marketing theories, which can then be adapted (depending on data findings), to better inform how sustainable marketing is implemented. Qualitative methods have been underused in empirical research to date and, given the effectiveness of qualitative methods at dealing with 'how' based questions, there is scope for research development in this area.

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